

## Farming's Pain and Gain

# Local Strawberry Grower Puts Organic Farming on Trial

*Swanton Berry Farm straddles a fence between farm philosophies*

### Conclusion of Series

by Rose Dean

GIVEN the surge of conventional farms converting to organics, the UCSC agroecology program is currently doing a conversion study with a local grower. In conjunction with the university, Jim Cochran of Swanton Berry Farm in Davenport is growing strawberries, some organically and some with chemical technology, on land that has been farmed conventionally for years. Cochran is also conducting his own independent studies on strawberries.

Jackie Lundy, academic coordinator of the UCSC agroecology program, said the project hopes to find the benefits and drawbacks of converting from chemical farming to natural methods.

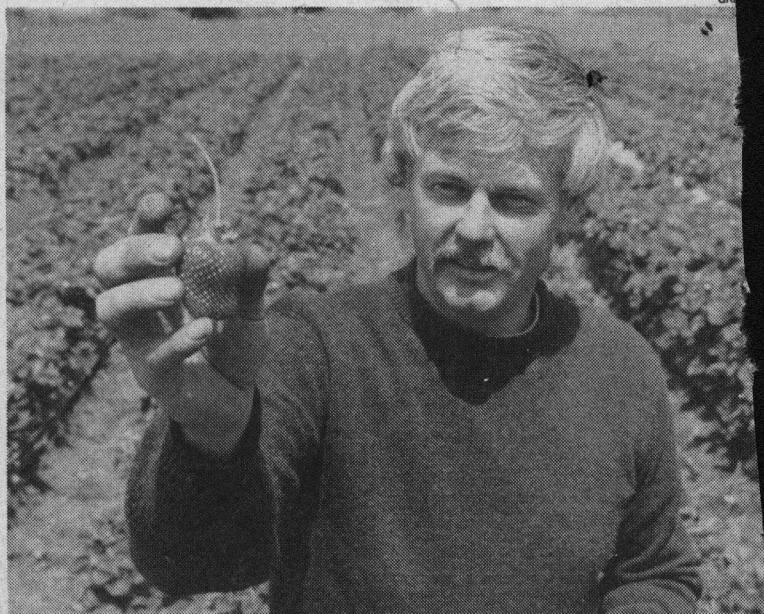
"The project's designed to establish farming strategies that reduce or eliminate the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. The research we're doing is following a rate of reduction of pesticide use. It's to see what the gains or losses are at different reduction rates," said Lundy.

The research began in 1986, and soon Cochran and the agroecology program will take statistical measurements. Besides looking into whether organic methods can produce as much strawberries as conventional, Lundy said they will study "soil systems and pests, weed population, management techniques and economic costs."

Cochran has farmed organically for five years. He said he became interested in studying contrasts between natural and conventional methods for growing strawberries after trying to grow strawberries organically with only limited success.

"I need to know what is wrong with my soil and plants in a much more detailed way than a chemical grower does. A chemical grower can spray some sort of poison to kill any bug or use a chemical fertilizer to achieve any nutrient value easily," Cochran said.

Although conventional methods of growing strawberries have been perfected over the years, said Cochran, organic methods are a hit-or-miss proposition.



Fruits of his labor: Jim Cochran of Swanton Berry Farm in Davenport.

"There's a tremendous amount of technology that's been built up over 40 or 50 years which has perfected the science of growing strawberries chemically. But nobody really knows how to grow strawberries organically and make money. They're not hard to grow (organically) per se, but they're hard to grow and make money at," said Cochran.

"The problem is, chemical use has pumped up (strawberry) yields to the point where they are five to 10 times the amount they used to be 40 years ago. I'm basically starting back where (growers) were 40 or 50 years ago without using all the chemicals. I'm trying to compete with those yields—I'm lucky to get 50 percent of the yields," said Cochran.

On a little more than an acre, Cochran has invested over \$10,000. He says he's "stopped guessing" at what he expects to harvest and admits he subsidizes his strawberry experiments with the sale of his vegetables and by borrowing money.

But Cochran believes he'll be in the forefront of the organic strawberry industry if he persists in his research. Already, conventional strawberry growers visit him, curious to see where his research is leading him.

"I get regular visits from conventional growers of strawberries," said Cochran. "I'm out there flopping around like a fish out of water in a sense. But I'm facing a lot of the problems that (conventional growers) may have to face some day when they have some chemical they can't use anymore."

More than organic success stories prompt conventional farmers to change their agricultural methods.

With the passage of Proposition 65 in 1986, use of certain chemicals in agriculture may soon be eliminated.

"With the implementation of (Proposition) 65 and its ramifications, there's been a lot pressure on growers to find alternatives. They're finding that some of the chemicals they've relied on are no longer allowed," said Lundy.

But Lundy isn't convinced that organics is the answer for all farmers facing problems.

"The bottom line is economics: Can they make their mortgage payments? Can they meet production costs? If they can be assured that the risks they take in converting is not going to put them out of business, I think there'll be a number of growers willing to convert," Lundy said.

"It's a matter of the risk involved and other problems farmers have to face with reduced prices and the farm debt crisis ... to go into what is perceived as a high-risk production method. Organics could be the last straw that broke the camel's back for a number of growers."

Perhaps it is the conventional farmer's troubles which make organics appear so good, contends Mark Lipson, executive secretary of California Certified Organic Farmers.

"Agriculture in this country is being turned on its ear. Farming is a marginal proposition under any situation, so the success of organic farmers is relevant in that context," Lipson said.

"But as the organic farming industry gets bigger, it will have to face the issues of conventional agriculture. It's rapidly approaching issues like financing, land values and migrant labor." •